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From the Archives: The Poetry of Sterling M. Means- The Pentecostal Publishing Company Collection

Sometimes exploring an archive collection will uncover a mystery.¹ This happened recently as I was working with one of our archives book collections. The Pentecostal Publishing Company was founded about 1888 by Henry Clay Morrison, and merged with L. L. Pickett's Pickett Publishing Company (at the same time Pickett's *Way of Faith* holiness periodical merged with Morrison's publishing efforts to ultimately become the *Pentecostal Herald*). The Pentecostal Publishing company remained active until 1942. During its time in operation, the Pentecostal Publishing Company published over 500 books primarily focusing on the Holiness Movement and the Methodist Episcopal Church South. Asbury Theological Seminary was given the rights to the publishing company material in H.C. Morrison's will (H.C. Morrison was also the founder and first president of Asbury Theological Seminary). I became involved in a search to find materials published by the Pentecostal Publishing Company which we did not own in our collection in the archives. I found a copy of a rather obscure book called *The Black Devils and Other Poems* (1919) by Sterling M. Means. It was not unusual for Morrison to publish volumes of poetry, which he did occasionally, but this case stuck out. Sterling M. Means was listed as an African-American poet, and to my knowledge this was the only book published by Morrison written by an African-American in a catalogue of books that is heavily dominated by white male holiness preachers.

It still remains a mystery to me how H.C. Morrison was connected to Sterling M. Means and how he came to publish this book. It is possible that Means, the pastor of a C.M.E. church in Lexington, Kentucky at the time, met Morrison in the area, perhaps at a camp meeting or some similar function. It is also possible that Means paid to self-publish through the Pentecostal Publishing Company (which would not be completely impossible- there are also church cookbooks published by the Pentecostal Publishing Company- possibly for fundraising purposes). This time period was in the middle of

the Jim Crow Era in the South, and publishing opportunities for African-Americans were few. The only contemporary African-American poet who was known to have made a living off of his poetry at this time was Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906).² As with many African-American poets of the time, Dunbar mostly published in newspapers. But Dunbar was also friends with Orville and Wilbur Wright, who were classmates, and they directed him to the United Brethren Publishing House where he subsidized his first book in 1893. Dunbar worked as an elevator operator and made his money back by selling copies of his book to those who used the elevator. Perhaps the situation was similar for Sterling Means. Means did publish a poem in honor of Dunbar and wrote in a style similar to Dunbar's often making use of dialect, which was popular at the time.

Little is known about Sterling Meade Means. He appears to have been born December 3, 1882 in Alabama to Elias Means and Vacey Meade, who were possibly born into slavery in South Carolina. His poetry shows clear references to a classical education, but nothing is known about his education. By the time his first book appears, he is a minister in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (which became the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in the 1950s) (C.M.E.). An article in the *Western Index* of Topeka, Kansas about the Georgia Conference of the C.M.E. dated December 12, 1913, makes a short note about Rev. Sterling Means which reads, "Means is a poet, author and preacher. In all these qualities he is the peer of any Negro of his race. He has captured the white South, won a scholarship in Chicago University from the University of Georgia (white)." While the University of Chicago was one of the few institutions of higher education open to African Americans (between 1870 and 1945 they graduated 45 African-American Ph.Ds.) and it was adjacent to a large African-American community, the archivist at the University could find no record of Sterling Means graduating from the institution. It was noted however, that the University only maintains lists of graduates, not those who attended classes, but never graduated. It is possible that Sterling Means took classes here, but did not graduate. Likewise, the archivist at the University of Georgia could find no reference to a scholarship given to an African-American around 1913, although he suggested a trustee and philanthropist, George Foster Peabody gave a great deal of support to African-American institutions, and might possibly have sponsored someone like Rev. Means. The University of Georgia was not integrated until the late 1960s.

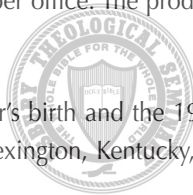
Rev. Means married Effie J. Mitchell on December 7, 1911 in Tishomingo County, Mississippi and would have at least three children according to the 1920 census: Sterling, Jr. (born about 1913), John (born about 1914) and Allora (born about 1918). His two sons were born in Georgia, probably while he was serving as pastor of Holsey Temple C.M.E. in Rome, Georgia, which he refers to in his first book of poetry, *The Deserted Cabin and Other Poems* (1915, A.B. Caldwell, Publisher, Atlanta, GA). A.B. Caldwell appears to be a Georgia publishing company that focused on the African-American community and did publish some other books of poetry at the time. In a note to his poem "Ode to the Statue to the Women of the Confederacy," he reprints a newspaper article from *The Rome (Ga.) Tribune-Herald* which originally printed his poem:

An Unusual Production

An unusual type of Negro has recently arrived in Rome and taken up his work as pastor of Holsey Temple, C. M. E. Church. This is the little church at Broad and Ross streets, and the Negro is Sterling Means, a well-educated man, not large in stature and not bold in appearance, quite different from the average Negro preacher type of fiction, and often of fact, that is large, well-fed, and clothed in a lengthy broadcloth coat.

White people who have heard Means preach say he is a natural orator, such as his race sometimes produces, and that when he gets to 'going good' he can almost outpreach anything in these parts, with a wealth of fervid simile and apt illustration. Be that as it may. Means is a poet of no small ability, as Romans can judge for themselves. He had written an ode to the statue erected to the honor of the Women of the Confederacy, which is far above the average of the poetry that usually finds its way to a newspaper office. The production is unusually creditable.

By the time of his daughter's birth and the 1920 census, Rev. Means and his family were living in Lexington, Kentucky, where he was the pastor of Philips Chapel C.M.E.



Shortly before coming to Lexington, it appears that Rev. Means and his family spent a brief time in Indianapolis, Indiana, where he is referred to as the pastor of St. Philips C.M.E. in some newspapers from January of 1918. Rev. Means followed up his first book of poetry with a second volume, *The German Warlord and the British Lion* (1918, Pauley Co., Indianapolis, IN). Pauley Company seems to be a small publisher primarily aimed at publishing material related to the Indiana Historical Society at the time. This volume is almost exclusively focused on poems related to World War I, and is in large part an epic poem covering the entire history of the war. Rev. Means registered for the draft for World War I on September 12, 1918, but there is no evidence that he served in the war, and this date is so close to the end of the war that it is doubtful that he would have seen active duty. His poetry however, does show a clear desire to honor African-Americans who served in various wars in the history of the United States.

In 1919, Rev. Means published his third book of poetry, *The Black Devils and Other Poems* (1919, Pentecostal Publishing Company, Louisville, KY). During the fighting in the Argonne Forest in 1918, the 370th Infantry (an African-American unit) distinguished itself in the battles of Lorraine and Oise-Aisne. They were such determined and fierce fighters that the Germans called them *Schwarze Teufel* or “Black Devils” and the name was adopted by the 370th Infantry. This is from where the title for Rev. Mean’s book is taken. Rev. Means’ experiences in life seem to have taken him in a different direction away from poetry after his third publication. In 1925, he published a book *Africa and the World’s Peace* (1925, Kanawha Valley Pub. Co., Charleston, WV), which appears to be a rather scarce publication from a publisher that mostly published West Virginian historical material. On July 2, 1928, Rev. Means married Amy Dunbar in Trumbell, Ohio, and his marriage license lists his occupation as a publisher. By the 1930 census, he is listed as living with his wife Amy and three step children: Paul, Jr. (born about 1923), Helen J. (born about 1925) and Silas A. (born about 1927). He is listed as having a previous marriage, but no references can be found to Effie or any of the other children. By 1930 he is living with his new family in Erie, Ohio.

Rev. Means became very influenced by the work of Marcus Garvey and his Back-to-Africa movement, which is somewhat evident in his fourth book.³ In a publication for Rev. Means’ founding of the Ethiopian Crusaders League and Afro-American Zionist Movement, published around 1940, he lays out his platform for the organization, which includes, “To

change the name Negro to Ethiopian. ‘Negro’ is a slave name given the race by Spaniards for the lack of understanding” and “To establish a National Home for the Race in Liberia and other suitable sections of Africa similar to the Jewish State in Palestine.” These parts of the platform accompany more common ideas of revising the education system, fostering better race relations, and appealing for equal opportunities for employment. By the 1940 census, Amy Means and the children are listed as living in Toledo, Ohio, but she has listed her status as “widow,” which does not appear to confirm what we know about Rev. Sterling Means.

In 1945, Rev. Sterling M. Means publishes his final known work, *Ethiopia and the Missing Link in African History*, which seems to be self-published, but can be found in numerous reprints today. In this work, he seeks to correct misunderstandings about African history and culture and deal with racist attitudes about the “primitive” nature of African Americans. After 1945, I have been unable to locate any other traces or date of death for Rev. Means or his first wife and their children. Amy Means, his second wife, died May 6, 1974 in Toledo and is followed shortly by the youngest son, Silas a veteran of World War II who dies September 21, 1974.

For the most part, scholars have overlooked the works of Sterling M. Means. Part of this is likely due to how his style was understood. In *Negro Poets and their Poems* (1923, Associated Publishers, Inc. Washington D.C.), an early anthology edited by Robert T. Kerlin, Means’ poetry is included, but under the category of “Dialect Verse,” where two of his poems “The Old Plantation Grave” and “The Old Deserted Cabin” are compared, one in standard English and the other in dialect. Since poetry in dialect has tended to make people uncomfortable, his categorization in this area may have led to his obscurity. The categorization is not really just however, as much of his verse is not in dialect at all. One of the few writers to seriously mention Means’ verse within its context is Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. in an article on African-American poetry from 1877-1915.⁴

Modern views of the dialect poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar are now questioning the easy dismissal of verse in dialect.⁵ This was a popular form of poetry at the time, being adopted by white authors as well. As with Dunbar, Means uses dialect in several important ways. He uses the lyrical style to communicate sentimental ideas. He also uses dialect to communicate humor within the African-American community. One powerful descriptive poem in dialect is “Honey Chile, I Saw ‘Um Pass,” which describes the patriotic feeling of the African community in Indianapolis as it witnessed

a parade of over 1,200 African-American soldiers heading off for World War I.

Honey Chile, I Saw 'Um Pass
(From *The Black Devils* 1919)

(Written in honor of the Colored Draftees of Indianapolis, who have gone to the Colors.)

Did you see our boys a-leavin',
Ez de bans begin ter play;
An' such a-stepin' to de music,
Ez dey did on yesterday.

You had to shuv yo' way to see 'um,
Ez dey marched on to de train,
An' Old Glory she wuz wavin',
Wid de sound of music strain.

Did you hear de noise an' shoutin',
Ez dey wuz markin' step by step,
Tho untrained in soldier drillin',
But wuz flirtin' time wid hep,

Dey stop de cars and blocked de traffic,
An' de crowds wuz in a mass,
How did dey look? I can't describe it,
But Honey Chile, I saw 'um pass.

An' de folks wuz all a-wavin',
An' little banners filled de air,
Sad "Good byes" and "God be with you,"
While you 'er fightin' "over there."

Dey forgot discriminations,
Dey forgot dat dey wuz black,
Fur de fires of patriotism,
Burns in white an' black alike.

Dey will do the deeds of Wagner,
 An' repeat Fort Pillow too,
 Where de fathers fought for Freedom,
 In de days of Sixty Two.

But it hab anuther title,
 It iz now Democracy,
 Which will mean a higher Freedom,
 When dey fight beyond de sea.

When dey reach de plains of Flanders,
 Dey will face de Germans gas,
 An' Brur Kaiser he will tell you,
 Honey Chile, I saw 'um pass.

According to *The Indianapolis Star* of August 21, 1918, on August 20th, 1,258 African-American draftees marched through the streets of the city. It notes,

Yesterday evening, the city's downtown streets were filled with cheering, shouting, and singing as 1,258 African American men, escorted by a platoon of mounted police and patriotic black organizations waving flags and banners, marched enthusiastically to Tomlinson Hall to hear "Godspeed" and blessings from family and friends as they prepared to depart for Camp Dodge, Iowa and their long expected opportunity to help America win the war. The hall was packed to overflowing with the draftees seated on the main floor. Gov. Goodrich gave a short speech, and then Mayor Jewett addressed the crowd saying, "Not a single colored man who has fought in our wars and bled for the Stars and Stripes has ever returned in defeat or disgrace. The record of bravery of the American negro would astound the world."

However, it is also important to note how Means inserts several references in the seventh stanza. The first is a reference to the Battle of Fort Wagner which was fought on Morris Island near Charleston, South Carolina on July 18, 1863 when the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the first all-black regiment of African-Americans recruited in the North charged the fort. A total of 116 men were lost from the regiment as well as Colonel

Robert Shaw, their white commanding officer, but Sergeant William Harvey Carney became the first African-American to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for taking up the flag and continuing toward the walls.

A second important reference is made to Fort Pillow, about 40 miles north of Memphis, Tennessee, a captured Confederate fort that was being used by Northern troops, many African-Americans. When the 500-600 Union troops were attacked by General Nathan Bedford Forrest (later the first grand wizard of the KKK) and around 2,000 Confederate troops on April 12, 1864, the fort was soon taken over. Instead of taking the African-American soldiers as prisoners of war, the Confederate troops massacred between 277 and 295 black soldiers. "Remember Fort Pillow" would become a rallying cry for African American troops from the Union.

While Sterling Means tended to write descriptive poetry and focused on African-American soldiers, he was not opposed to speaking out against racial injustice. Perhaps one of his strongest pieces is "The Ghosts of East St. Louis." As soldiers returned from World War I and some urban areas of African-American communities began to prosper, it was met with growing anger and rage from white citizens. This led to riots in some areas, including East St. Louis, where between May and July 1917, white citizens destroyed African-American property and killed people at will. As many as 250 African-Americans were killed in these riots. About 6,000 were left homeless, and by today's standards almost eight million dollars in property damage was sustained. The police chief instructed his officers not to shoot any white citizens and thus they left the rioters alone to do their damage. Means questions the very nature of democracy, especially in the light of African-American soldiers fighting for the U.S. in France while their families received no protection at home.

The Ghosts of East St. Louis
(From *The Black Devils* 1919)

Last night as I lay slumbering upon my little couch,
I was questioned, "why Democracy" had failed our cause to vouch.
The old Tom Cat was quiet and had ceased to chase the mouse;
And a sad majestic silence prevailed throughout the house.
The winds were blowing mournfully,
The skies were black with cloud;
And nothing broke the stillness save a dog was barking loud.

As I was somewhat nodding and dozing in a trance,
 Dreaming of our soldiers somewhere on the fronts in France.
 A host of spirits came to me and one gave me a gentle touch,
 That aroused me in my slumbers and disturbed me very much.
 The souls of the defenseless, whose lives had been robbed;
 For they were the helpless victims of the East St. Louis Mob.
 There were innocent little children, mothers, and men giant mould.
 They were common rustic toilers whose hearts were pure as gold.
 And they told their solemn mission for they had one common plea,
 "Will you ask my Country to explain Democracy?"

Why, I said that I will tell you or will try the best I can,
 That true Democracy is the Freedom and equal rights of every man.
 Then they were more persistent than they really were before.
 "Please tell us why they mobbed us, we would certainly like to know?"
 "And the murderers go unpunished and little is done or said,
 When we were simply toiling to earn our children's bread."
 Then I commence a-weeping as they told their Tale of woe,
 To think when we are mistreated that we had nowhere to go.
 All sudden in appearance, came a Man of ungainly mould,
 "Father Abraham Lincoln with the Flag with rippling fold.
 He gave fond consolation to the spirits and to me.
 He said: "I am the Father and Martyr of true, Democracy;
 I set the ripple upon the wave and it shall break beyond the sea."

Rev. Means ends with an optimistic note, with Lincoln providing the hope for future equality, when democracy would finally be completed in the fronts of World War I. The reader of Means work is left feeling that the fighting of African-American soldiers in World War I will somehow bring a truer type of equality. But Means gradually loses confidence in this position over time, as he grows closer and closer to Garveyism as the only possible solution in his own mind.

Sterling Means was a master at observation and description. The following poem, "The Slacker" does not sound like a poem from 1919. It sounds more like the work of Theodor Seuss Geisel (1904-1991), otherwise known as Dr. Seuss, but it was written well before his writings. It describes a character Rev. Means saw on a street corner in Indianapolis. He doesn't seem to do anything and he seems impossible to describe, but he is a regular

fixture on the corner of one particular street. He is a part of the African-American community, but a part that is often overlooked or ignored. Means was part of the Great Migration, as African-Americans left the rural South and relocated to urban areas in the North and West. When I read this poem, I feel as if I am watching one of these people- relocated from the South, but now rootless and without purpose. For me, this poem makes the Great Migration take focus in one verbal picture. He even brings this picture to the mind as he refers to Brother Josh as one who “reminds you of someone you have seen in the Southland years ago” but now relocated to an urban setting in the Midwest, without a sense of real purpose.

*The Slacker**

(From *The Black Devils* 1919)

We have a slacker in our town,
 He is always on his beat;
 You will often find him somewhere round,
 The corner of West North Street.
 I have never seen him in a store,
 Nor in a Barber shop,
 I have never seen him in a row,
 Nor running from a cop.
 I have never seen him in a Church,
 Nor at the Y.M.C.A.
 I have never heard him sing a song,
 I have never heard him pray.
 If you wish to know Brur Josh,
 He has a bread box for his seat,
 He sits beside the Market store,
 The corner of West North Street.

I have never seen him in a Park,
 I could not say he shirks,
 I have never seen him on a Job,
 I donna where he works.
 I have never seen him take a dram,
 I could not say he drinks,
 I have never heard him talk enough,

To find out what he thinks.
 His height is far from being tall,
 He is not so very low,
 He reminds you of someone you have seen,
 In the Southland years ago.
 His color is not a sooty black,
 He is far from being brown,
 And then he is not what you might call,
 The blackest man in town.
 Should Gabriel blow the Trumpet now,
 He would find a lots in France;
 He would find some at the picture show,
 He would find some at a dance,
 But if he then would find Brur Josh,
 To summon to the Judgment Seat,
 He would take the Indiana or River-Side Car,
 And stop at West North Street.

*A scene in Indianapolis suggested the Poem.

In a final example of Sterling Means' poetry, I want to go back to his first book in a very reflective work about U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt. I don't know if this poem is tied to an actual photo, but I can imagine the poet seeing an image of the adventurous American president, famous for his imperialistic and colonial ambitions, pictured near an ancient Egyptian sculpture of the Pharaoh Ramses. In this poem, Means compares the leader of the United States with the greatest pharaoh of ancient Egypt. This pharaoh, who in Means' time was considered to have had armies of slaves building great monuments and pyramids. In the fourth stanza he lays the blame of Egypt's collapse on unjust practices in dealing with weaker "races." Then in the final stanza he sends a stark warning to the United States and its president as he labels President Roosevelt as "the Ramses of the present." Clearly, here he is making a call for justice for African-Americans, as well as a warning that the prosperity and success of the United States as a nation was intricately tied to its enacting justice in dealing with those recently released from slavery. It is also important to note that Means was an African-American poet in the middle of the Jim

Crow Era, located at the time of this poem in the deep South in Georgia. The atrocities of lynching and violence against African-Americans was a well-known occurrence. The context makes the reading of this poem even more powerful than it might otherwise be.

Roosevelt at the Temple of Rameses
(From *The Deserted Cabin* 1915)

There he stands in contemplation,
At the Temple of Rameses,
'Mid the ruins of civilization,
In the land beyond the seas —
Egypt in her faded glory,
Once a land of towering pride,
Where her dusky monarchs slumber,
And their mighty kingdoms died.

He beholds the ruined relics
Of the glories now long past,
And the wrecks of human greatness,
With their evening shadows cast;
Where they sleep beneath the pyramid,
In their hoary rock-hewn tombs,
And beside the ancient rivers.
In the buried catacombs.

Egypt's Scepter has departed,
And her throne is in the dust;
And a sad majestic silence,
Teaches thee that others must;
'Tis the fate of all the ages,
When a kingdom is unjust
In dealing with the weaker races,
It shall crumble in the dust.

It is now the strenuous "Teddy,"
The American Prince of State,
Reads old Egypt's faded glory,

And beholds her awful fate;
 The Rameses of the present
 Views Rameses of the past.
 And the wrecks of human greatness,
 With their evening shadows cast.

The poems of Rev. Sterling M. Means open a fascinating window of African-American views of the United States in the period of Jim Crow. But even from this early poem, we can see a fascination with Africa and the civilization it produced. The fascination becomes more obvious as one reads through Means' later works, especially as he sees a political state in Africa as a real answer to the African-American plight in the harsh racism of the United States. His early optimism in a country in which justice would prevail if only patriotic African-American soldiers could show their worth through their bravery and courage to their white counterparts is replaced by a pessimism in the post-World War I realities he experiences.

I am bit surprised that Sterling M. Means has not been identified before in a significant way. There is no dissertation comparing his works to Paul Laurence Dunbar, although I think it would be fascinating reading. His work is passed over in favor of a few more well-known names, and this is perhaps a result of the obscurity of the few early opportunities he had to print his work in very minor presses, such as the Pentecostal Publishing Company. Now might be a good time to see him get the credit he deserves as well as some good recognition as the voice of the African-American soldier in the era of World War I. First Fruits Press, an open access publishing branch of Asbury Theological Seminary has now published *The Black Devils and Other Poems* for free online, and hope it will get more attention there. It can be read in its entirety at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/firstfruitsheritagematerial/198/>

The archives of the B.L. Fisher library are open to researchers and works to promote research in the history of Methodism and the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Images, such as these, provide one vital way to bring history to life. Preservation of such material is often time consuming and costly, but are essential to helping fulfill Asbury Theological Seminary's mission. If you are interested in donating items of historic significance to the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, or in donating funds to help purchase or process significant collections, please contact the archivist at archives@asburyseminary.edu.

End Notes

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² Cf. with <https://poets.org/poet/paul-laurence-dunbar> for more information and poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar.

³ For a discussion of how Ethiopia was viewed politically in some African-American circles in this time, see William R. Scott "Black Nationalism and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict 1934-1936." *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 63, no. 2 (April, 1978): 118-134).

⁴ Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. "The South in Afro-American Poetry, 1877-1915." *CLA Journal* (College Language Association), vol. 31, no. 1 (September 1987): 12-30. Bruce also notes how Means takes a poem from starting with a white view of things and then moves the poem, so that by the end an African-American perspective become dominant.

⁵ See Michael Cohen "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Genres of Dialect." *African American Reviews*, vol. 41, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 247-257.

